



“SPELLBOUND”

Chapter Two from the Novel by
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Based on the podcast series
produced by



CHAPTER TWO

As she studied the West Front of the Capitol from the National Mall, Nicoleta Tzone thought that it didn't look much different than it had during President Chen's inauguration six months ago. In fact, as she continued across 7th Street and continued walking east along Madison Drive, she thought that everything about downtown Washington seemed almost unchanged since her last visit.

Almost.

She continued walking along the Mall and toward the Capitol at a steady clip, pretending not to stare at the flood of people rushing past and around her in the same direction. Some ran on foot along the paths and sidewalks edging the Mall; some ran over the grass. Several of the runners sprinted at blinding speeds, with those on Independence and Constitution Avenues nimbly weaving between the post-rush hour flow of cars, buses, taxis, and the occasional

limousine. Others didn't bother with the streets. Instead, they flew overhead, easily overtaking the runners and fast walkers. Nix even saw one man leapfrogging, putting about fifty to seventy-five feet behind him with each jump. Even for Nix, who grew up in a world where superhumans and humans always co-existed, that looked pretty remarkable. Again, it seemed almost normal.

Almost.

A glimpse through the window of a vending machine for *The Capitol Post-Times* confirmed that it wasn't.

She stopped to check the date on the front page of the newspaper: June 2. This year.

Correct, she thought.

Then she looked up at the people streaming toward the Capitol – the men in their three-piece dress suits and shirts with starched collars and four-in-hand ties; the women clad in their smartly tailored serge jackets and ankle-length skirts with their hair styled in tight buns. She'd been trying not to pay unwarranted attention to them, but they passed, they could not help but notice her. Most of their glimpses lasted only a second because they were in a hurry, but the appearance of this young woman in her late 20s startled them.

After all, she wore her tight, long, blond curls hanging loose around her face and down her back. She was dressed in what appeared to be a blue dress shirt of a masculine style with an odd collar and dungarees (at least, that's what that type of trousers was thought to be called). She wore odd, suede ankle-high boots instead of high-button shoes. The clothes fit her exceptionally well, as proven by the fact that the looks garnered by passing males of all ages lasted considerably longer than those of passing females. Still, their faces reflected that her outfit was hardly appropriate for the occasion, or for the time, whatever both might have been.

Nix ignored any gawking. She was too curious about the *Times-Post's* front page headlines:

“President McConnell Sends Superhuman Registration Act to Congress.”

“NASA Launches Mars Rescue Probe.”

And, just barely visible above the fold:

“Supreme Court Declines to Hear Carroll Appeal – Public Execution at Capitol Tonight.”

Nix pushed her way to the outer edge of the flow and ran the rest of the way up the Mall as far as she could go. The Mall, the Capitol, and all of downtown Washington began to turn orange as the sun began setting. The U.S. Capitol Police had set up a deep cordon around the building to keep the throngs of loud, shouting onlookers from crossing 3rd Street onto the main grounds, largely because the press and media had reserved that space. Dressed in black, armored riot gear adorned with bald eagles on the front of their shielded, faceless helmets, they stood at the ready with large shields and imposing pistols that – from Nix’s viewpoint – looked as if they could accommodate tear gas grenades. Or worse.

Are they expecting a riot?, Nix wondered. Is this crowd here to oppose the execution of ... well, whomever? Are they going to charge the Capitol, stop the execution?

She had only to listen to the crowd for a few moments to get her answers.

“What time is it?” “Nearly seven.”

“Come on, let’s go!”

“Kill her now! She’s dangerous!”

“Nope,” Nix said aloud.

She looked to the West Front and saw that, as with the inauguration, a special stage matching the main building’s neoclassical architecture style had been erected in front of the Capitol for tonight’s occasion.

In the distance, a large bell pealed. The crowd on the Mall – which Nix now estimated to be at least 100,000 – fell silent as one ring followed another. Nix shuddered. It sounded like the bell one would toll at a funeral.

After the final, seventh ring, the crowd exploded in applause and cheers. Many eyes were wide and wild with anticipation.

The powers-that-be didn’t make them wait long. From a corridor within the Capitol that led onto the stage, four of the armored guards provided a faceless, solemn escort to two other guards who were tasked with rolling out a gurney whose platform was elevated to an angle whereby the crowd could see the woman who was strapped to it. She wore a standard, prison-issue jumpsuit and shoes. Her bare right arm was extended. A bottle of clear saline solution hung behind her head; an intravenous tube ran from the bottle to a catheter in her left arm. She had matted brown hair, sharp, hard facial features, and eyes that looked tired, but defiant, as they gazed out at the mad crowd.

Nix tried not to hyperventilate when she realized that she was probably about to witness a public execution. But for what? Should she intercede? What would happen if she did? Would the guards open fire and kill her? Was the woman justly convicted, deserving of the spectacle?

She tried not to think about the most obvious question, but it inevitably came: what would Mama do? She would wait for the facts, Nix concluded. So, she waited.

A young man wearing a black three-piece suit and carrying a tablet followed the small procession, stopping next to the gurney on the side where the woman's arm was strapped down parallel to her body. He lifted the tablet and switched it on. In the gathering dusk, the light from the screen cast a sinister glow on his neutral face as he spoke in an even, amplified voice.

“Citizens of the District of Columbia, on this –” He paused as the crowd briefly exploded in a self-congratulatory cheer. When that began to die down, he continued. “Whereas the Constitution of these United States recognizes superhuman powers as natural God-given abilities, and recognizes those powers derived by supernatural origins to be unholy, undesirable, and dangerous to the well-being and defense of these United States, does hereby decree that Arabella Carroll – having been duly tried before a jury of her peers and verified by Federal authorities in human and superhuman medicine – stands guilty of possessing and employing supernatural abilities.”

The crowd snarled at the woman, who did not acknowledge them.

“Whereas the possession of supernatural violates established Federal and International laws,” the young man with the tablet said, “and whereas all appeals have been exhausted in accordance with Federal law, Arabella Carroll is hereby sentenced to humane execution by lethal injection. Signed on this date, June the Second, Two thousand thirteen, by Addison Mitchell McConnell, Junior, President of these United States of America.”

The crowd cheered for this louder than they had cheered for themselves a moment earlier, and Nix's blood ran colder.

The young man with the tablet stepped aside as two more guards appeared on the terrace. These two were not armored or armed, but still armored to cloak their faces and genders. One rolled a cart ahead of them. The cart had three syringes molded in three colors – yellow, orange, and black – and a white syringe. The arrival of the executioners made the throng on the Mall even more enthusiastic.

None of the syringes were labeled, but Nix had read enough accounts of executions to know what was in them: an anesthetic to sedate the condemned, followed by a paralytic to collapse the lungs and diaphragm, followed by the final toxic chemical to stop the heart. The white syringe probably contained saline to flush out the lines between each chemical's introduction, because nobody wanted to be accused of having an unsanitary execution.

The executioners set to work. The first efficiently removed a catheter from its sterile packaging, probed the condemned woman's arm for a vein, found it, and plunged it into her arm. The second executioner unwrapped a package of sterile tubing and handed one end of it to his/her counterpart, who attached it to the catheter.

The second executioner then attached the loose end of the tubing to the yellow syringe and nodded to the young man with the tablet.

Nix looked at the poor woman on the gurney, who did not watch the preparations, or the crowd. The only evidence of any distress visible to Nix was rapid breathing, which was understandable. Did she have supernatural powers? Was she trying to be a martyr?

Nix sensed that she might have her answer when the young man with the tablet held his palm up to the onlookers. They brought their festive roar down to a murmur as he stepped up to

her and said, almost respectfully, “Arabella Carroll, have you anything to say before sentencing is carried out?”

Arabella Carroll turned her eyes, but not her head, in the direction of the functionary. “If I could work magic,” she said quietly – but audibly, thanks to the sensitive hidden microphones situated around the terrace – “you would not be able to do this.”

“Which is why we took the precaution of mixing neuromuscular blockers into your last meal,” the young man said. “We’ll pass your compliments to the chef.”

While the people around her chuckled at the words, Nix boiled. Forget about what Mama would do – what could *she* do?

The young man with the tablet nodded to the first executioner, who placed his/her thumb on the plunger of the yellow syringe.

That’s when a loud, deep thud filled the air, sounding like a giant’s footfall. As if reacting to the vibrations created by such an event, the Mall and the West Front of the Capitol jumped. Thousands of spectators on the Mall stumbled, falling into and over each other; the young man dropped his tablet and followed it to the floor of the stage; the guards and executioners, trained to fight under the most adverse and surprising circumstances, shifted continuously to stay upright and ready to confront whatever caused the disturbance.

Whatever strategy they had become moot when all of their weapons – along with the syringes for the execution – were crushed in their hands by an invisible force.

“Bastards!”

The cry came from above, in a rich, Romanian voice, but before anyone could turn their eyes upward to search for it, a crimson bolt dove at the terrace from the skies. When it stopped, a petite woman in her early 60s with tousled white hair and a conservative, but non-revealing, green and black bodysuit with matching gauntlets and boots. She hovered above the terrace, close to Arabella Carroll's gurney, scanning the guards, the young man, and the viewers with a steely, angry expression.

People responded to her arrival with astonishment and fear. "My God!"

"Another magic-user?"

"Is that really her?"

"That's Nataliya Tzone! She's for real!"

Nix no longer wondered what her Mama would do in this situation; she was about to see for herself.

Nataliya addressed the assemblage without the government's audio equipment; she didn't need it. "You are not cheering justice. You are cheering discrimination. You are cheering murder! This woman, and the others that the government have executed in secret, have committed no crimes. But now that those executions have been revealed – and I have nothing left to lose – I cannot allow this to continue."

She glanced at the general area surrounding the West Front. Fresh squads of guards with functioning weapons were heading her way. She fixed her gaze on the young man without the tablet, who was sprawled on the floor of the terrace, watching her with wide, fearful eyes.

“Tell your president that the next time he decides to burn a witch,” Nataliya said, “do it right.”

She raised her arms up in a broad, sweeping gesture. A bright, hot column of fire coiled around her and the prisoner, starting on the terrace and wrapping its way into the sky. The blast of heat caused the young man, the executioners, any nearby guards, most of the people on the Mall to recoil. Three seconds later, the column vanished, along with Nataliya and Arabella Carroll, leaving behind only an empty gurney and no damage to the space it occupied.

Nix was so taken with her mother’s heroics that she wasn’t prepared when the terrified crowd abruptly turned and ran away from the Capitol. As she started to dodge the flood, a voice yelled out, “Nicoleta Tzone!”

She turned toward the source of the voice. It was one of the flying, superhuman citizens, a man who hovered above and in front of her, pointing at her. “That’s Nataliya Tzone’s daughter!”

The mass was confused:

“It can’t be!”

“She’s dead!”

“They executed her and the other one, the sister, last week!”

“She’s back from the dead! You can’t kill them!”

“Yes, we can!”

“Kill her now! Get her!”

Instinctively, Nix turned and ran like hell from the charging crowd, which followed her up the Mall. She'd sprinted about half a block when a thought crossed her mind.

“Hey, wait. I’m Nataliya Tzone’s daughter. *Duh!*”

She stopped spun, formed claws with her hands and drew them back in a threatening gesture. Seeing this, some of the attackers stopped suddenly; many of those who didn't fall over the ones who did. She didn't know what, exactly, she was going to do, but she didn't want to harm all those people who wanted her dead – even though they'd found the courage to renew their charge.

Before she could act, she – and everyone else – were halted by what sounded like a cannon fired at ground level. Many people started running away; others dropped to the ground; Nix aimed her hands in the direction of the sound, ready to protect herself, and her attackers.

She wouldn't need to. She knew this when the middle-aged man stepped in front of her and stared down the ignorant mob. He stood close to six feet in height. His dark brown hair and beard were brushed with the faintest wisps of silver. He wore an olive drab sweater with matching trousers and black boots, making him look almost, but not quite, military. His right arm held – no, *was* – the weapon that distracted everyone. From the shoulder to the elbow joint, his right arm was as human as his left. From the elbow down, however, his “arm” was a long, gun-metal grey barrel with mazes of circuitry running across the outer surface.

“Now hear this,” the man drawled in a rich baritone. “My name is General Rhett Corsair, United States Army, retired. I am not a violent man, but if you do not allow this young lady to pass unharmed, I promise you, I will become one.”

Nix relaxed her defensive posture slightly. “What kept you?” she whispered.

“What can I say, darlin’?” Rhett said. “Your mama distracted me.”

“Tell me about it.”

She turned away from Rhett, held up the thumbs and forefingers of her hands at right angles, and spread them apart. As she did, a bright rectangle of light materialized to create a portal.

“I gotcha covered,” Rhett said. “I’ll be right behind ya.”

Assured, Nix darted into the light, startling everyone who watched. True to his word, Rhett backed toward the portal but, just before entering, drew a bead on the gurney and its deadly accessories, and fired a loud, blue blast of light from his arm.

The blast scored a direct hit on the gurney, blowing it to pieces.

His exit wouldn’t be as clean as Nataliya’s, but it would be as memorable. That thought made him smile as he willed his gun to transform back into an arm, used its hand to toss a salute to the mob and ducked into the portal, which vanished behind him.